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SUBJECT: IRAN DOMESTIC POLITICS: 'FROM CRISIS TO STALEMATE' (2/3)

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At this point the Green Path Opposition (GPO) is more of a persistent problem for the regime than an existential threat, and it is unrealistic to assume that the GPO will be able to effect any 'regime change' in the short-term. Iran's ruling regime is likely to continue seeing increased violence and suppression as its most effective tool, including in the build-up to mid- February anniversary of the Revolution and the opposition's next planned protests. However it is unlikely be able to eliminate the GPO, which will continue trying to co-opt public holidays to stage anti-regime protests and also try to increase divisions among regime elite. Although subsets of the GPO are radicalizing, there is no reason to assume that GPO elements seeking to fundamentally change the system represent most Iranians. The GPO does not mirror the widespread an varied opposition that overturned the Shah thirty years ago, and the standoff now is increasingly becoming a stalemate that (inter alia) imperils the IRIG's ability to engage with the West. Until a new homeostasis is reached in Iran's political ruling class, progress on issues of bilateral importance will be even more difficult than usual. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) NOTE: This is the second in a series of cables examining the Iranian opposition since the June 12 Presidential election, what might happen in the short-term, and what the most effective levers of US policy have been so far and what combination may have the most impact in the coming months.

ON THIS SIDE: REGIME

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¶3. (C) Iran's current leadership sees the GPO with its periodic street demonstrations more as a persistent problem than as an existential threat. Ideology and personal experience have taught regime hard-liners to equate compromise under pressure with weakness. Supreme Leader Khamenei (SLK) himself is said to believe that the Shah's fatal mistake, and the reason the Revolution succeeded, was because the Shah 'retreated,' in addition to believing that the USSR's fall was due to the same reasons. As such, the regime can be expected to remain committed to using force and repression against the GPO as necessary to both incapacitate its first- and second-tier leadership (primarily through detention) and its rank and file (through detention and violence, to include deadly force).

14. (C) Opposition activists have told IRPO that at least part of the regime strategy is a pre-emptive 'rolling round-up' of not just active GPO elements but also sympathizers. Thus in addition to those it identifies as participating in GPO activities, the regime goes after reformist reporters, feminists, human rights advocates, labor organizers, ageing 'National Front' sympathizers, 'Second of Khordad' Khatami-era reformists who are not active in the GPO movement. According to some foreign-based GPO leaders, informed estimates indicate approximately 2,000 people have been thus far detained.

15. (C) Indications are that the regime is laying the groundwork for using even more violence, to include the broader use of lethal force at the popular level if necessary. This could include executions of those found guilty of 'warring against God,' a term which the regime is prone to define somewhat expansively. And while there is certainly a limit to the regime's willingness to use violence against its own people, there are no indications that it is anywhere near it. One former IRGC officer told an Iranwatcher that the IRGC wants to avoid killing more than a 'few dozen' protestors in any one location on any one day, partially to avoid associations with 'Black Friday' -September 8, 1978 - when mass fatalities in a demonstration turned many against the Shah). The Ashura-day murder of Mousavi's nephew, in addition to the January 7 incident where security officials seemed to have coordinated shots being fired at a car carrying Karrubi indicate a regime intent to

DUBAI 00000015 002 OF 006

calibrate its level of violence to intimidate the opposition and its leadership.

16. (C) The media press environment is also expected to become far more restrictive, with one prominent reformist newsman telling IRPO that he expects all reformist papers to be shut down in the short-term. The regime continues to block 'subversive' websites, while also stepping up its jamming of satellite broadcasts from both VOA and BBC.

17. (C) In addition to its familiar tools of force and repression, the regime also occasionally feints toward reconciliation, issuing statements counseling moderation and offering up an occasional scapegoat, such as the recent Majlis report blaming former Tehran Prosecutor General Mortazavi for the detainee deaths at the Kahrizak detention center. In the public thrust and parry over post-June 12 events one regime voice conspicuous by its absence has been that of President Ahmadinejad, who has largely kept silent. This strategy has drawn criticism by some fellow hard-liners, who fault him for his unwillingness to publicly endorse harsh measures against the GPO.

18. (C) According to GPO expatriate leaders and other sources, the ruling regime can be seen as composed of three groups, with Khamenei still exercising control:

- relative moderates, such as Ali Larijani and Ahmad Tavakolli in the Majlis, and Asghar Hejazi, former Foreign Minister Velayati and former Majlis Speaker Nateq-Nuri all in the Supreme Leader's office. This group seeks to have SLK cease his active support of Ahmadinejad so that he can be removed by the Majlis;

-hardliners, such as IRGC Intelligence Head Hossein Taeb, Khamenei's son Mojtaba, Basij Commander BG Mohammad Reza Naqdi, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, and Ahmadinejad and his own crowd. This

group seeks increased use of force, to include lethal force, on the GPO and its leaders;

- a middle way 'swing' group, composed of SLK himself, his two sons Mostafa and Maysam, and some intelligence officials. This group seeks a middle course between the two above, favoring imprisoning, beating but not mass killing of protestors, and house arrest and intimidation but not arrest and/or execution of GPO leaders.

ON THIS SIDE: GPO

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19. (C) Going forward, the GPO seems committed to using public holidays as a show of strength and support, with the next big GPO planned demonstration being the anniversary of the Revolution's victory on February 11 (22 Bahman). According to at least one prominent GPO activist based abroad, the GPO leadership has a three-part strategy:

- (1) Maintaining GPO unity while also 'growing' and training its numbers, expanding both geographically and in its constituent class/demographic/ethnic elements. Public street gatherings on key dates are one way of showing solidarity, as are slogans from rooftops, work slowdowns, and other non-violent 'political actions.' It will also seek to expand its use of 'blitz' demonstrations, i.e. rapid assembly and dispersal of protestors, in

DUBAI 00000015 003 OF 006

addition to university demonstrations and other forms of protest. In this regard it seeks to strengthen links with Iran's labor force, many of whom have a tradition of striking over non-payment of wages. (NOTE: The GPO's diffuse structure, and constant regime pressure, will make implementing better organization and training difficult in the short-term).

- (2) Creating divisions within the ruling elite, by 'peeling off' the moderates around Khamenei. Mousavi's recent statement in which he tacitly accepted the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad government was a step in this direction. Second of Khordad 'theoretician' Said Hajjarian used to speak of the tactic of 'pressure from below, negotiations from above' as the reformist strategy, and at least some GPO strategists hope that elite pressure from moderate conservatives dismayed at ongoing popular protests will seek to convince SLK to cease his active support of Ahmadinejad, at which point he will be subject to possibly politically fatal attacks from the Majlis due to (inter alia) his financial mismanagement. These GPO strategists, who curiously also see regime compromise as a sign of weakness, see Supreme Leader Khamenei's 'throwing Ahmadinejad under the bus' as the first step to ultimately bringing down Supreme Leader Khamenei himself

- (3) Continuing non-violent efforts to 'paralyze' the government, largely through boycotts of IRGC affiliated companies, through work slowdowns, and ultimately through strikes. Some within the GPO see the December 27 Ashura demonstrations as equivalent to the 17 Shahrivar demonstrations during the Revolution, after which the people slowly 'lost their fear' of the Shah's machinery of repression. However, even the most optimistic GPO leaders acknowledge the movement needs significantly more organization and training before it is able to engage in larger anti-regime activities (NOTE: Another advantage of a non-violent strategy is that such non-violent protests are technically authorized by

Article 27 of the Constitution. As such, any move to anti-regime violence would represent not just an escalation in the likely overall level of violence, but a move from inter-Constitutional to extra-Constitutional opposition).

¶10. (C) This 3-part strategy, as articulated by a GPO leader based abroad, in many respects depends on the willingness of the mass movement of the GPO for support; whether it has been embraced by the popular elements of the GPO opposition is unclear. Furthermore, the increasing radicalization of popular elements within the GPO potentially undermines this strategy and at the very least makes near-term predictions less reliable. An opposition that increasingly responds to regime violence with its own violence gives the regime greater license to increase repression even further, creating an unpredictable cycle of violence coupled with greater disillusionment with the regime.

¶11. (C) MEDIA AND CYBERSPACE: The regime and GPO clash not just in the streets but also in cyberspace, and the GPO can be expected to expand its efforts to create a virtual space in which it can disseminate information to Iranians inside Iran. It continues to spend significant energies on circumventing Iranian attempts to monitor, control and block Internet access in Iran, and is exploring the possibility of providing satellite high-speed internet access, although funding is the main barrier. In conventional media, expatriate GPO activists have told IRPO that while in the short-term GPO is forced to rely on satellite TV such as VOA and BBC to get oppositionist news into Iran, it is seeking to create its own news fora, to include its own satellite television broadcast.

NO 2ND REVOLUTION

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DUBAI 00000015 004 OF 006

¶12. (C) No one knows or can know what will happen next. While Iran is not North Korea, since June 12 and the subsequent crackdown it has become harder to follow significant events there, both at the popular and elite level. Foreign media presence has been severely curtailed and domestic media is increasingly censored. And Iran's hardline intelligence-security cabal's 'soft overthrow' fixation has reduced the number and type of Iranians willing to talk frankly to the press (and to Iranwatchers) about domestic events.

¶13. (C) Against that backdrop one must note the 'selective perception' bias that tends to over-emphasize the GPO's potency. Some pro-GPO bias stems from their being the (relative) 'good guys' in this drama, to the extent that their agenda encompasses principles dear to Western democracies. Additionally, Western media's Iran contacts tend to be pro-reformist, with Western press quoting pro-GPO activists and analysts almost exclusively. Also USG officials' interactions with Iranians tend to be largely limited to Iranians willing and able to talk with us, with a disproportionate number of them being those seeking USG assistance in helping fight the regime. Finally and in many ways most importantly 'if it bleeds it leads,' so there are no 'Youtube' uploads on demonstration days of the millions of ordinary Iranians who are going about their business.

¶14. (C) In this regard, many IRPO interlocutors comment that for most in Tehran, life is going on as normal, with no sensation of living in 'a police state' (except on the key dates targeted by the GPO, and only then for people in specific areas where clashes occur). In other words, it seems that the vast majority of

Iranians, though more critical of the government to greater or lesser degrees, are continuing to live their lives as normal. There is no reason to assume that those 'radical' GPO elements seeking to fundamentally change the system represent most Iranians. At most, it appears that many and possibly most Iranians want a peaceful reform of the system as opposed to another revolution with an uncertain outcome.

¶15. (C) Having stipulated that no one can assert with confidence what will happen in Iran's domestic situation over the next year, it does seem that, as expatriate Iranian oppositionist Ibrahim Nabavi has written, Iran is moving 'from crisis to stalemate.' The clash between Iran's government hardliners and the GPO is unlikely to end decisively to the benefit of either side within the short-term, and it is quite improbable that in the short-term the GPO will in some decisive way 'defeat' the Khamenei regime and change Iran's theocracy into a secular republic.

¶16. (C) In terms of the significant metrics by which can judge the course of future events, some of the ones significant both in 1977-79 and now include the following:

- Numbers: The numbers of protestors willing to take to the streets now is an order of magnitude smaller than in 78-79.

- Classes: the GPO as currently constituted doesn't seem to have a significant ethnic or labor component, and doesn't seem to have 'broken out' of Tehran in a significant way to other major urban centers, though we recognize that our awareness of developments outside of Tehran is likely to be more limited.

- Anti-Gov't Activities: Unlike 1979, there have been no paralyzing strikes, bazaar closings, military defections, or signs of the government ceasing to function. Whereas the bazaar merchants in 1979 had the inclination and money to fund striking workers deprived of pay, there seems to be no such GPO 'deep pockets.' Indeed both elements of the 'bazaar-mosque' alliance that were in

DUBAI 00000015 005 OF 006

many ways the backbone of the 1979 Revolution are singularly absent in today's opposition, as each has been largely co-opted by the government. There have been no indications that Rafsanjani and the Servants of Construction or Qalibaf's Tehran Municipality are currently a significant GPO funding source. On a far more limited scale, expatriate 'Second of Khordad' Reformist elements within the Iranian Diaspora are leading efforts to create a fund for the support of detainee families.

- Elite Defection/Emigration: Those hardliners who constitute and support the regime are very likely to remain committed to the fight against the GPO, since they know they would have no role in any new order and would also have nowhere else to go. However for the GPO, many reformists and oppositionists dissatisfied with Iran's plight would rather quit than fight, as shown by the ongoing brain drain, to include increased exodus of political activists. Anecdotal information shows that many of larger numbers of affluent and educated Iranians who can be presumed to be oppose the hardliners are taking their families and fortunes abroad.

¶17. (C) Although much GPO animus has transferred from Ahmadinejad to SLK, it can be assumed that at least part of the movement's support would fade were Ahmadinejad to be replaced by someone less

controversial and better equipped to successfully govern. Although SLK has shown that he prefers suppression to compromise, at some point pressure at the elite level might persuade him to abandon or marginalize Ahmadinejad. Granted, the subsequent Presidential election could provide another spark for future protests, but the point here is that at both at the popular and elite level, at least some oppositionist fervor is still fixated on Ahmadinejad, and would presumably dissipate with his dismissal.

STALEMATE TO CONTINUE

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¶18. (C) The IRIG's decision-making process, multi-polar and messy even before this turmoil, has been further strained by the battle between the regime and the GPO as well as by the animosity toward Ahmadinejad from within the regime. For example, domestic political opposition torpedoed Khamenei and Ahmadinejad's ability to sell the IAEA's Tehran Research Reactor agreement. Subsidy reform, the most important piece of domestic legislation in years, was passed only after a protracted political cage fight between Ahmadinejad and the Majlis. Amid the IRIG-GPO stalemate and the accompanying factionalization in the conservative 'Principalist' camp, Iran will be hard pressed achieve consensus and move forward on issues relevant to the USG.

¶19. (C) As one US-based IRPO contact noted, only one thing is certain, namely uncertainty over how the contest will play out. It is clear neither regime leaders nor opposition figures are convinced of the path ahead and they are constantly recalibrating and shifting positions. Moreover, he added, there is hesitancy on the part of all actors to move decisively. He noted that this was visible in the regime's unwillingness to use the full force of its repressive capabilities to crack down on the opposition once and for all.

¶20. (C) COMMENT: The GPO is not Poland's Solidarity, and Tehran 2010 isn't Tehran 1978. In other words, it is quite unlikely that the current Iranian system of government will significantly change in the short-term, and if there were any significant change, it is more likely to be towards a more authoritarian regime than to be towards a more democratic one. However, having posited why the GPO is unlikely to effect fundamental short-term changes in Iran's ruling system, it is equally true to say that it is unlikely to go away. What makes the preceding important for the USG is the fact that Iran's current domestic strife is a political 'black hole'

DUBAI 00000015 006 OF 006

that swallows all other issues, both domestic and foreign, such that until a new homeostasis is reached in Iran's political ruling class, progress on issues of bilateral importance will be even more difficult than usual. END COMMENT.  
EYRE